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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate

Republican-led Senate passes immigration reform

By Senator Bill Heath



We have reached "Crossover Day" in the General Assembly, which is the deadline for bills to be passed along from the House to the Senate or vice versa. In my opinion, the Senate has accomplished a great deal so far in 2006, including legislation to fight against voter fraud, to allow our citizens to defend themselves further if they are attacked, to improve child support law, to improve education and to provide for an elective bible study course in our schools. Last week, the state Senate addressed a growing concern of Georgians by passing one of the toughest, most comprehensive immigration reform laws in the U.S.

Senate Bill 529, known as the *Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act*, has probably been the most talked-about piece of legislation to come out of this year's session. The bill spawned a lengthy debate and five amendments, before passing the Senate by a mostly bipartisan vote. Senate Bill 529 deals with four major areas, including public safety, public contracts, private employers and public benefits. Specifically, the legislation outlaws human trafficking, which has become a problem in Georgia over the last decade. The bill also requires those arrested on a criminal charge to prove that they are in the country legally.

Since the early 1990s, Georgia has seen an influx of illegal immigrants moving in to take jobs in the agriculture arena, the construction and landscaping industry, and in the carpet mills of north Georgia. Many of these laborers are paid in cash and don't pay any taxes. We feel that both the businesses that employ undocumented workers and the workers themselves are cheating the system. They are cheating the hard-working, legal residents of this state by draining our public health system and our system of indigent defense, and overcrowding our system of corrections.

The provisions of SB 529 include:

Public Safety

Human traffickers prey on illegal immigrants forcing them into modern-day slavery. This legislation will make trafficking a crime with serious consequences. Next, SB 529 states that jailers must determine the nationality of each person booked into jail on a felony charge. Also, this legislation will punish con artists, representing themselves as attorneys, who provide fraudulent services to uninformed immigrants.

Public Employees & Contracts

Under SB 529, every government agency, contractor and subcontractor fulfilling public works contracts must use the Federal Work Authorization Program (Basic Pilot). Basic Pilot, offered free by the federal government, allows employers to instantly verify their employees' work eligibility.

Illegal Labor

SB 529 establishes what can be used as a "valid identification and employment authorization document." Valid ID must be an unexpired document found on the current I-9 form. No payments to an individual in excess of \$600 a year may be declared as a deductible business expense unless the individual has presented a valid ID and employment authorization document.

Public Benefits

This section does not deny, create or change public benefits in any way. Federal law defines all benefits. This section merely sets forth procedures for state officials to verify eligibility for benefits. Every agency of this state shall now verify lawful presence in the U.S. of every applicant age 18 or older for public benefits as defined in federal law.

The goal of this legislation is simple. We can no longer afford the financial strain of the illegal population on the social programs in our state. We are also protecting all Georgians, including unsuspecting immigrants, from fraud and the heinous crime of human trafficking. The bill now goes to the House for consideration.

On a separate note, last Thursday we passed Senate Bill 606, which would prohibit any protest, demonstration or disruption within 500 feet of a funeral or memorial service. The bill passed by a unanimous vote of 56 to 0, which is rare in the Senate. The move is in direct response to the despicable acts of disruption going on in different parts of the U.S. at the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq. This type of abhorrent behavior needs to be stopped. We should be honoring those who serve our country, not disgracing them.

Please feel free to call me with your opinions or suggestions. Until next week...

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